

**A PROFILE OF NANAIMO'S HOMELESS POPULATION:
A PRELIMINARY REPORT BASED ON THE NOVEMBER 2005 HOMELESS COUNT
CONDUCTED BY
NANAIMO'S WORKING GROUP ON HOMELESSNESS ISSUES**

INTRODUCTION

This document reports the findings of a census of the homeless population of Nanaimo, British Columbia, undertaken by Nanaimo's Working Group on Homelessness Issues (NWGHI) during the fall of 2005. It's the second census the NWGHI has conducted. The first census was carried out in April 2005, following which the umbrella group of agencies and others addressing homelessness committed to doing a second count to see how numbers might change from season to season.

The census projects were both embarked on with full understanding that counting a community's homeless population is more art than science: trying to locate and interview every person in a fluid population whose members do not always want to be identified is no small challenge. Consequently, there is no claim that the count is 100% complete.

METHOD

In carrying out its second census of homeless persons in Nanaimo, NWGHI used a one-page questionnaire, revised from one we used in our first census; it, in turn, had been modeled after one used in Kelowna, BC.

The count was conducted largely between 8 pm and midnight, Monday, November 21 on streets in the downtown core, in selected outlying neighbourhoods, and at shelters. Interviewing was done by volunteers in small groups, with each group having a designated geographic area to cover. Other forms were completed by staff of shelters. Respondents' cooperation was acknowledged by an honorarium composed of comfort and hygiene items.

The census did not attempt to include the relative homeless, i.e. persons who have no place of their own but are "couch surfing" at various people's homes. Logistic problems prevented us from querying people on line at meal sites as we did in the April census. A full comparison of the two counts appears at the end of this report.

Note: In this report, numbers of responses do not always add up to the total reported since some questions were not answered by everyone. Means (averages) are often used as are medians (where half the sample was below that number and half above) to convey an overall pattern. Differences between groups (e.g., length of homelessness for men vs. women) are reported only when they are statistically significant as ascertained by standard tests.

THE SAMPLE

A total of 83 completed census forms were returned, including two forms from couples. Five other respondents had a partner and there was one parent accompanied by three children. In addition, in six instances where respondents had someone with them, no additional information was collected about how many others were with them, and so the minimum of one additional person has been counted. This yields a total of at least 99 homeless persons at the time of the count:

$$83 + 2 + 5 + 3 + 6 = 99$$

Asked whether they had been counted in the April census, only 10 persons (13.5%) said they had been, and another five (6.8%) were unsure, suggesting a large turnover in the homeless population.

Of those 85 interviewed, 46 persons (54%) were interviewed on the streets, the remainder at shelters and other facilities for the homeless.

Among the interviewees, males outnumbered females 47 (57%) to 36 (43%). Ages of respondents ranged from 16 to 63 with a median of 35.7 (half were older than 35.7, half were younger), and an average of 35.5. On average, male interviewees were older (37.6 years) than females (33.1). Of the eight respondents over age 50, only two were female, but all four of the under 20 group were females. The table to the right shows the age distribution for those interviewed.

<u>Age Group</u>	<u>Number</u>
Under 20	4
20 - 29	19
30 - 39	26
40 - 49	21
50 +	8

**Age Distribution
of Respondents**

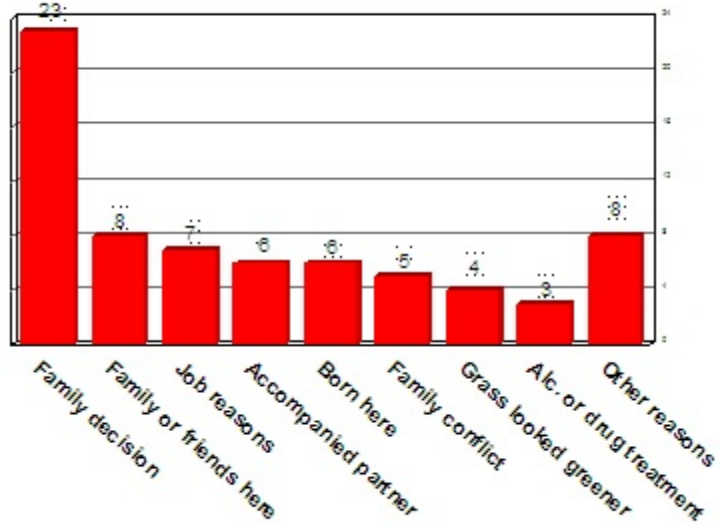
Almost three-fourths (61 persons or 73%) were Caucasian, 12 (14%) were First Nations, five (6%) were Metis, and six (7%) were of other ethnic backgrounds.

The length of time respondents had been in Nanaimo ranged from a few days to 45 years, with an average of 10.5 years and a median of six years.

The most common reason for being in Nanaimo (23 cases) was that it was a family decision to come here, as with children whose parents made the decision to live in Nanaimo. The next most common reasons were family or friends being here (eight) and by job reasons (seven). Six respondents had accompanied their partner here and a like number were born in Nanaimo and either hadn't left or were returning home. Family conflict was the reason given by five respondents, and four came to Nanaimo for reasons

like "the grass looked greener" here. Another three came for alcohol or drug treatment. The remainder came for a variety of reasons, none of which was cited more than twice. Data are shown on table to the right.

What brought respondents to Nanaimo



Seventy-three persons (86%) were alone, while 12 (14%) were accompanied by someone else. Other than all eight of the respondents over age 50 being alone, there was otherwise no relationship between age and being homeless alone or with others. There's also a strong trend for males to be alone more often (94%) than females (75%).

BECOMING HOMELESS

This present period of being homeless in Nanaimo ranged from a few days to 15 years for our respondents, with a mean of 1.42 years and a median of five months. Forty-eight persons (64%) had been homeless less than a year, 27 (36%) over a year. While 23% of the women in the sample had been homeless over a year, 45% of men had. On average, women in the sample had been homeless about ten months, while for men the average was about 22 months.

Length of Homelessness in Nanaimo



Addiction of one sort or another, or spending one's housing money on alcohol or drugs, was cited by 34 persons (42%) as the way they became homeless. Next most common (23 cases or 28%) was financial difficulty of one sort or another (unable to find affordable housing, running out of money, losing one's job, EI running out, etc.). Family conflicts (abuse, abandonment, etc.) were cited by 12 persons (15%). Eleven persons (14%) had been evicted, which of course could also be related to financial problems or addiction.

THE HOMELESS EXPERIENCE

A little more than one-third (29 persons or 35%) were sleeping outside currently; an additional 3 (3%) sleep outside sometimes. Nine other responses to the question of where one sleeps included in one's car, at crack houses, at johns' places, or at various homes ("couch surfing"). One respondent said she doesn't sleep. Just over half of the sample (44 persons or 52%) were currently sleeping at shelters or related facilities.

Twenty-four persons (29%) describe their physical health as good, 37 (44%) as fair, and 23 (27%) as poor. A lower figure (21 or 25%) describe their mental health as good, while 42 (50%) describe it as fair and 19 (23%) as poor. (Two persons, 2%, said fair-to-poor). With one exception, no significant differences were found on health conditions by factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, sleeping inside or outside, etc. The one exception was better physical health reported by those who had eaten a meal the day of the interview; the adjacent table contains those numbers.

	Good	Fair	Poor
Had not eaten	0	7	6
Had eaten	24	29	16

Self-reported physical health conditions by eaten/not eaten

One in eight respondents (13 persons or 16%) did not have a meal the day of the interview. Of those who did have a meal, the most common place it was obtained was at the shelter where they were staying (17 persons or 31%). Salvation Army provided the meal for 10 persons or 18%, and other meal sites fed five respondents (9%). Seven (13%) had meals at two or more facilities. Men were more likely than women to have eaten, 94% to 77%. There was a non-significant trend for those in their 20's to be less likely to have eaten.

Asked whether they had made any money the day of the interview, 54 persons (68%) reported they had not while 26 (33%) had. For those who had made any money, the most common sources of income were the sex trade with seven persons (35% of those with income); other work, including recycling (seven persons or 35%); and panhandling (six persons, 30%). Respondents interviewed on the street were more likely to have made money than those interviewed at a shelter by a 46% to 16% margin. Of the seven in the sex trade, six were females; of the six otherwise employed, five were male; and five of the six doing panhandling were also male. Fifty-one persons (61%) are currently receiving some form of government assistance, with Disability Assistance (19 persons) and Social Assistance (17 persons) being most common. Three persons were receiving Employment Insurance.

Respondents were asked what was their biggest barrier to getting a home of their own. Lack of money or the lack of affordable housing were listed most often: 35 times, trailed by addictions with 19. Employment was noted 11 times, transportation problems five times and mental illness three times. No other barrier received more than two mentions.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Respondents were invited to make any other comments they wished, and 29 persons did so. Seven people took the opportunity to thank you or say nice words about some shelter or other facility, three mentioned discrimination and stereotyping of homeless persons, two called for fairer government policies, and two asked for drug treatment programs. Assorted other comments each received one mention.

COMPARISON BETWEEN APRIL 2005 AND NOVEMBER 2005 CENSUSES

Total Numbers

The total count in this census - 99 persons - is obviously very different than the April count of 149. No one who works with Nanaimo's homeless population would suggest there's been a 33% reduction in that population: their case loads testify to a different story. So, how is the large difference to be explained? Several factors are likely at work. First, we know that some of the data gathering that was done in the spring was not able to be done this time around, or was not done as thoroughly: we know we missed some people. Second, the cold weather very likely drove some homeless persons to find some place - any place - to be indoors, and not necessarily at a shelter. (Nine persons said they couch surfed or slept in crack houses, or johns' places, or cars). Third, volunteer census takers believe we were counting too early in the evening as they saw occasional evidence of outdoor living, but no one at the site at the time.

Demographic Profile

Points of comparison	Spring	Fall
Total count	149	99
In both censuses, males outnumber females, with the margin widening somewhat in the fall	54%-46%	57%-43%
Age range was roughly similar	15 - 71 years	16 - 63 years

Points of comparison	Spring	Fall
Average age was almost identical	35.6 years	35.5 years
Median age was almost identical ($\frac{1}{2}$ above, $\frac{1}{2}$ below)	36	35.7
Males continue to be older, on average... to be less represented among the under 20 group... and more represented among the over 50 group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (m) 38.3 to (f) 31.5 yrs • 6 of 8 under 20 were female • 15 of 16 over 50 were males 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (m) 37.6 to (f) 33.1 yrs • all 4 under 20 were female • 6 of 8 over 50 were males
The proportion of the homeless population that's Caucasian (C) grew, while the First Nation (FN) proportion shrunk; the small Metis (M) proportion also grew	C: 68% FN: 25% M: 1% O: 5%	C: 73% FN: 14% M: 6% O: 7%
Average time in Nanaimo was up, as was the median time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • few days to 58 years • 8.6 years on average • median of 3 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • few days to 45 years • 10.5 years on average • median of 6 years
Most common reasons for being in Nanaimo look to be about the same <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family decision Wanting to be closer to family Grass looked greener... Followed partner here For alcohol or drug treatment Work or search for work Born here Got stuck, ran out of money Family problems or conflict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 16 cases 12 7 6 6 7 5 4 4 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 23 cases 8 4 6 3 7 6 2 5
The proportion of respondents who were alone rose considerably from spring to fall	66% alone 34% not	86% alone, 14% not

Points of comparison	Spring	Fall
Males were increasingly more likely to be alone	m: 72% f: 62%	m: 94% f: 75%
Both the average time being homeless and the median showed increases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • few days to 19 years • average: 1.02 years • median: 3 months 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • few days to 15 years • average: 1.42 years • median: 5 months
The proportion homeless more than a year is way up	86% under a year, 14% over a year	64% under a year, 36% over a year
In the spring, females on average had been homeless more than twice as long as males; in the fall, that reversed itself	f: 18 months m: 8 months	f: 10 months m: 22 months
The reasons cited for becoming homeless show large increases in addiction and financial problems:		
Addiction	30%	42%
Family conflict	17%	15%
Eviction	16%	14%
Financial reasons, i.e., poverty	18%	28%
Assorted other reasons	19%	1%
Each census found about a third of respondents sleeping outside	32%	35%
The fall census saw a sharp reduction in the number who rated their physical health as good (g) vs. fair (f) or poor (p)	g: 40% f: 35% p: 25%	g: 29% f: 44% p: 27%
Likewise, reports of good mental health were down in the fall	g: 36% f: 32% p: 32%	g: 25% f: 50% p: 23% f-p: 2%
The proportion who didn't have a meal the day of the census remains at about one in six	17%	16%

Points of comparison	Spring	Fall
Shelters (SH) and the Salvation Army (SA) continue to be the most likely places respondents had eaten	SA: 34% SH: 20%	SA: 18% SH: 31%
The spring finding of females being more likely to have eaten has been reversed in the fall census	f: 91% m: 77%	f: 77% m: 94%
Each census found about one in three having made any money on census day	34%	33%
The fall data show less reliance on drug dealing and relatively more reliance on panhandling		
Sex trade	14	7
Other employment	10	7
Panhandling	5	6
Drug dealing	4	0
An increase was seen in the fall for the proportion receiving no public assistance; Disability Assistance (DS) and Social Assistance (SA) continue to be most common among those receiving some help	32% SA: 27 DS: 25	39% SA: 17 DS: 19
Economic poverty looms larger in the fall among major barriers to getting a place of one's own		
Lack of money, job, or lack of affordable housing	37	46
Addictions	28	19
Transportation	1	5
Mental illness	0	3

Conclusions

Overall, the fall census sample differed from the spring sample in a number of important ways:

- smaller in number
- more Caucasian, fewer First Nations
- been in Nanaimo longer
- more often had family decisions behind their being in Nanaimo
- much higher percentage were alone
- been homeless 40% longer, especially among men
- addiction played a larger role in their being homeless
- less physically and mentally healthy

- more reliance on panhandling
- economic factors loom larger as a barrier to getting a place of one's own

Another key finding in this census does not appear in the above table of comparisons. It is that only 14%-20% of the fall sample had been counted in the spring census. Even allowing for some people missed in this second count, that piece of data suggests the homeless population turns over rapidly. Neither count showed very large numbers of people who had been homeless for years. On this second count, however, the proportion homeless a year or longer had grown substantially from 14% to 36%, and the average length of homelessness increased from 1.02 years to 1.42 years.

Based on that last item of data plus the lesser degree of physical and mental health, the larger role attributed to addictions, and the larger barrier poverty presents in keeping them homeless, this fall sample would appear to be in more dire straits. One can conjecture that as the weather turned colder, those with more resources and skills managed to get out of the cold by one means or another, leaving behind a more deeply impoverished group.

B. Jones, December 13, 2005